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**The Case Against the Democratic Influence
of the Internet on Journalism**

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The Case Against the Democratic Influence of the Internet on Journalism

Introduction

The past decade has seen myriad claims of the democratising potential of the Internet in general, and in particular of the possibility for mass, non-professional, online media production¹. The thrust of these claims range from the enhanced opportunities for citizenship (Coleman 2005) and the dismantling of elite gatekeeping structures and hierarchies (Delli Carpini and Williams 2001; Lievrouw and Livingstone 2006) to the egalitarianism of horizontal networks (Bentivegna 2002) and improved oversight of mainstream politics and media (Drezner and Farrell 2004; Cornfeld 2005; Regan 2004). Democratization is, needless to say, a highly contested term. It will be used here to designate not the advance of normative principles of equality, freedom or justice, but simply agency to effect change in the public realm. The definition of publicness is also very debatable; here it refers to any arena in which issues of shared concern are contested and negotiated (Couldry et al 2007: 6-7) – it is not limited to traditional political institutions or Habermas's rational public sphere. In this chapter I argue that the democratising potential of online interaction, and blogging in particular, has been overstated by academic critics, policy makers and media professionals alike. This will involve suggesting different ways of theorising online media production, though it will also draw at least tangentially upon three very different pieces of research: a large-scale UK project investigating the relationship between people's sense (or absence) of media and public connection (Couldry et al 2007), a qualitative analysis of symbolic economies of professional identity amongst UK and US journalists (Markham 2007), and an exploratory survey of a selection of opinion blogs. Blogging is conceived methodologically in Bourdieusian terms as a field of cultural production, characterized by field positions differentiated according to forms and volumes of symbolic capital and by the collective misrecognition (though there is also evidence of reflexivity) amongst bloggers and media analysts of the 'rules of the game'; in particular, what constitutes authority in the blogosphere. It is suggested that blogging may be connected phenomenologically (rather than politically) to the 'culture of narcissism' thesis, and the implications in terms of field autonomy of an increasingly self-referencing blogosphere are considered.

Any argument that posits blogging as a democratising influence on journalism risks committing the fallacy of casting in political terms what is instead a cultural phenomenon. The mainstreaming of this form of cultural production (which, given research into the endurance of the digital divide, must be regarded as a limited universalization) should not be seen as a natural political good, but instead simply as a horizontal proliferation. Hierarchical proliferation of news production, although it by definition entails a defence of elitism, can be defended on the grounds that it is only by the maintenance of a restricted space of production that certain cultural forms are possible. This is not to suggest that hierarchical structures in journalism should be treated as sacred. Instead, the necessity of hierarchy as a general principle should be defended, while the specific forms that hierarchization takes should be made transparent and contested. This means that rather than depicting blogging as a force opposing cultural consecration – that is, the collective valorisation of particular symbolic forms according to mainstream or institutional

principles of differentiation – and the subsequent reproduction of unequal power relations in journalism, we should accept the necessity of rarefied spaces of journalistic production and instead turn our attention to exposing the strategies and criteria by which these positions are defined and occupied.

The chapter also makes a broader claim about the democratic limits of online practices of citizenship: in short, interaction in itself is of no political value if that interaction, in the words of one interviewee, ‘doesn’t go anywhere’. Further, there is evidence of a significant minority which is ‘already turned away’ (Couldry et al 2007) from both media and public engagement, and the Internet cannot, and should not, be expected to correct disconnection and broader alienation. (These claims run parallel to the arguments against policies of social inclusion which fail to answer either of the questions of ‘inclusion in what?’ and ‘for what purpose?’). Arguments for the democratising influence of blogging on journalism rely on a questionable premise of personalized authenticity, by which authority is perceived to consist in the genuineness with which a claim is made rather than according to some external frame of reference, and wrongly presume that political efficacy logically follows from freedom of expression. Our attentions – as both academics and bloggers – would be more effectively directed at the mechanisms which sustain the hierarchies and dominant symbolic forms of journalism today (rather than opposing such structures outright), and at the political forces – rather than cultural or media phenomena – which undermine democratic engagement.

Theorising Online Media Production with Bourdieu

One of the principal weaknesses in the claim that the Internet is a democratising influence on journalism is the assumption that the Internet is a political arena. I argue below that the Internet *should* be seen as political in the sense that it can be partly characterized as a field of struggle, rather than a neutral space of communication providing the basis for collaborative engagement. This, however, is distinct from depicting the Internet as a political field as such, *i.e.* one whose essence, if not reality, is conflict and negotiation over issues of shared concern. Rather, in Bourdieusian terms, it is best defined as a field of cultural production,² which subsists in the metafield of power, but is distinct from the field of politics and operates relatively, if weakly, autonomously. This means that online interaction proceeds to a significant extent according to the Internet’s internal rules of engagement, driven by an emerging etiquette. That said, those external principles affecting the Internet (the broader cultural context, the regulatory structure of the news media, market economics and so on) must also be taken into account. This is not to suggest that only traditional arenas should count as ‘political’ – countless viable alternative political spaces, from community media activism to online organising and campaigning networks have been identified (see for instance Downing 2001; Kahn & Kellner 2004). But what these arenas share is a common dominant set of principles of ‘vision and division’ – the key differentiating factors by which value is ascribed to symbolic capital. Such principles are associated with normative and historical factors including public and social institutions, and embedded modes of practice internalized and instinctively recognised as political. These discursively instituted modes of interaction and communication are not intrinsically legitimate but achieve a contingent stability as political practice through repeated enactment and historicity: namely, contestation, campaigning and mobilisation over civil, economic and potentially cultural rights. There is nothing naturally superior about these: indeed, from the Bourdieusian perspective, it is presumed that the internalization and

naturalization of such norms proceeds alongside a systematic misrecognition of other, more insidious, economies of power.

To characterize the Internet as a field of cultural production, then, is not to say it is a degraded political sphere, as much as it is not in itself a new and improved politics. While practices of citizenship do of course take place online, there is nothing *about* new communication technologies which are naturally democratising: they operate according to a set of principles which are distinct from the field of politics and should be understood on their own terms. That is, the elements which constitute the lifeworld³ of the Internet – discourse, identity, norms of practice, anticipation, creativity, professionalism, amateurism, instinct etc – are determined fundamentally differently than in those of other lifeworlds in which the centrality (if not specific form) of political norms such as citizenship, democratization, coercion, justice, domination, and so on has long been established. This is in itself problematic, but the point is that such critical problematization is both possible and widely practiced; the practically universalized dominant principles of politics are routinely challenged and picked apart. However, to conceive of the Internet in such terms is to forgo the critical assessment of its own principles of differentiation. This is not to suggest that the blogosphere is internally coherent and strongly autonomous from other fields, but as a distinct subfield of cultural production it should be thought of as structured according to adaptable, durable logics which are different from those of adjacent and intersecting fields. And given the sheer speed with which such principles and norms have become effectively natural and universal, it seems particularly important that we understand the contingent generative structures of this quasi-autonomous lifeworld. To import criteria from other fields with their own internal logics is to neglect the logics of determination of symbolic value in online communication – logics which are doubtless contingent upon specific social, historical and political conditions of possibility.

What does it mean then to characterize the Internet as a field of cultural production related to, but also partially autonomous from, other fields? First, like any field, it should be thought of as simultaneously structured and structuring: there is no virtual world characterized by competing but unresolved theories of its existence, rather there is a symbolic world (like others) manifesting a particular determination of a range of possible worlds. It is for this reason that we should not see any field of cultural production as being comprehensible *only* in its own terms, *or* as essentially arbitrary in relation to the economic and social contexts in which it subsists. (And by structuring, online media production should be conceived as having determining functions beyond the field of its genesis – including in what I have identified here as the public arena). In practical terms, this means that we can certainly interpret changes in journalistic practice and consumption in political terms, without extrapolating that either there is a corresponding determination upon the political field, or that new structures of journalism themselves have a political teleology, or final end goal or purpose. These new structures are particular expressions of generative logics: this means that their political determination is reasonable without being predictable, and that their determining effects will sometimes, haphazardly, include practices of democratization, without such determinations ‘completing’ those structures.

By way of (admittedly imperfect) analogy, let us consider Bourdieu’s critique of opinion polling as a democratising force in politics. The problem with claims made on the basis of polling, for Bourdieu, is that they misrepresent as political that which should be regarded as cultural. In short, the value of an opinion poll is contingent upon a culturally dominant principle of differentiation – popularity – and as such it should not be conflated with

political, and specifically democratising, criteria (Bourdieu 1994). To reiterate, this is not to suggest the superiority of (traditional) criteria for ascribing political symbolic value, nor to suggest that politics exists in a vacuum. But importing exogenous principles of domination undermines in the same blow both the iniquities and benefits of a field historically operating with a significant degree of autonomy. Further, those criteria do not have the same meaning when applied in different contexts (Matheson 2004), and their normalization in another field may proceed only through the misrecognition of specific political conditionalities. For example, the idea that the multiplication of sources of information online represents a democratization of knowledge conflates the criteria of freedom and choice. Likewise, ascribing value according to popularity – as is the norm for the majority of search engines – can lead to the conflation of competitive success and political mandate. (It has also been argued that the personalisability of search engines indicates the increasing prevalence of a discourse of individualization; see Carlson 2007b). Further, the proliferation of media producers online may be interpreted as culturally empowering, but to assert that this is a politically democratising function is to make commitments to specific interpretations of representation and self-determination – which are by no means uncontested within the realm of political debate. The danger is that if such specific values are normalized then their exogenous origins will go increasingly unrecognized, along with the normative commitments they may entail. I would suggest that such culturally determined criteria may include a politics of competitive individualism – not that this is necessarily indefensible, but that the colonization by this logic of other fields may contribute to its decontestation and dominance in political and other spheres of interaction.

Foucault, Habermas and the Defence of Hierarchy

A second and related way of theorising the massification of media production is to characterize it, after Foucault, as the incitement of discourse. For Foucault, power operates not (only) through negative injunction – explicit constraints on freedom of speech, say, or restrictive social norms – but through ‘positive’, stimulatory mechanisms. Psychiatry, for instance, does not wield coercive power by broadly prohibiting behaviour, but by encouraging individuals to talk – leading to sense being made of behaviour in terms of a discourse which categorizes, rationalizes and pathologizes. Likewise, from a Foucaultian perspective, increasingly prevalent representations of sexuality in the media (in women’s magazines, for instance) should not be interpreted as liberating, but as discursive production which acts as a form of discipline by inciting structured internal monologues in individuals. Instead of regarding media production as the realization of some latent or natural desire for self-expression made possible by new communication technologies, this approach sees the ‘will to blog’ as the product of cultural, economic and political forces. These might include a culture of narcissism, consumerist production of desire or the technological genesis of cultural practices – though in each case there are allegations of determinism to answer. At the more conspiratorial end of Foucaultian thinking, this may amount to interpreting any apparently unstructured proliferation of expression as evidence of new regimes of discipline, especially the instigation of internal discourses that regulate the individual. The blogosphere thus represents neither a democratized public sphere providing the preconditions for unfettered rational discourse, nor a top-down imposition of power by political or corporate elites, but the inculturation of norms whose coercive political effects are masked by their appearance as will and instinct, and whose durability is masked by their being re-presented as new norms. The appearance of novelty is associated with a cultural form which is under-determined (that is, relatively freer from structural

determination), masking the common determining structures which have given rise equally to media forms new and old. (The same logic might be argued to apply to 'citizen journalism', or public participation in mainstream news production; see for instance Deuze, Bruns, & Neuberger 2007). Brian McNair (2003) usefully distinguishes between the control and chaos paradigms of media politics, though by characterising chaos as a lack of (authoritarian) control there is an implicit equating of chaos and freedom in his model. While a norm of unruliness as central to a healthy democracy is certainly defensible, the Foucaultian position emphasizes the ongoing need to identify patterns of political determination in seeming disorder. After Giddens (1984), individuals do not act with voluntaristic agency; nor are they mere structural effects. Behaviour is structured by rules, resources, relationships and authority, yet the ongoing existence of these is predicated on their production and reproduction in social interaction. Accordingly, changing practices do lead to changes in rules, but should be seen as re-structuratuion rather than de-structuration. New practices do not indicate an absence of determination, but a different determination, which in this context and boils down to asking what determines identity, orientation, behaviour and action in an arena such as the blogosphere, and who benefits from its mainstreaming.

To characterize the Internet as not naturally democratising does not then equate to seeing it as an ideological state apparatus whose political functions of controlling citizens and reproducing hierarchies precede its use as a means of address, reception and interaction. The restructuring that journalism has been through over the past ten years does not represent an inexorable path towards increased coercion operating largely unnoticed. Restructuration does involve changes (and continuities) at the macro level, while the microscopic 'intimate structuration' to which Foucaultian theory lends itself does not reside only in the realm of the intangible. The task of the theorist is to illuminate the conditions of possibility, constraints and contingencies misinterpreted as unremarkable and unintended consequences of newly emerging restructured symbolic economies. This is entirely consistent with recognising that the Internet does provide an arena in which large numbers of individuals can communicate, notwithstanding the enduring caveat of the digital divide, much discussed elsewhere (see for instance Norris 2000; Norris 2001; Lievrouw and Livingstone 2003; Rice and Haythornthwaite 2006). But relative freedom of communication is not in itself a sufficient criterion of democratization. Even if we characterize the Internet *pace* Habermas primarily as a field of communication, we are not bound to the narrow premise that communication is foremost a matter of deliberation towards an agreed endpoint. In short, if we take a Bourdieusian rather than a Habermasian perspective, the Internet should be characterized at least partly as a field of struggle or *practical strategy*. Strategy here does not refer to the political potential of the Internet in terms of its efficacy in furthering the interests of political ideologies and movements. Rather, it refers to the political determination of the terms of communication, as well as authority, authenticity and so on: communication should be regarded as a structured set of embodied practices oriented towards some kind of gain beyond that which the communicative act announces. Interaction between bloggers and their peers and readers then may serve to obscure an underlying symbolic economy in which competition for misrecognized forms of capital proceeds; I consider below the possibility that systematically misrecognized authority and authenticity underpins struggles over status.

If this seems overly conspiratorial, and if the mere fact of expression or interaction is to be rejected as a sufficient condition of democratization, then the Habermasian alternative – a structured discourse with established rules of engagement and means of ascribing merit –

will need to be defended or developed (Bohman 2007). This means defending a system of media production which variously describable as elitist, institutional and bourgeois: that is, professional journalism. And while journalism's role as a democratic force in late capitalist societies depends on a code of practice enshrining a set of ethical principles adherence to which is accountable to peers or external regulatory bodies, it is demonstrable that the implementation of and reflection on those ethics are themselves effective means by which journalism's gatekeeping structures and internal hierarchies are preserved. In short, journalists' ethical practice and the way they talk about the ethical dimension of journalism has the effect of mystifying what it takes to be a good (and ethical) journalist (Matheson 2003), and this is antidemocratic in the sense that this process serves as a barrier against entry into the journalistic field – and there is no shortage of evidence that the demographic failing to break into professional journalism over-represents minorities, women and people of low socioeconomic status (see for instance Sutton Trust 2006; Chambers et al 2004).

As such, the deprofessionalization of journalism for which new communication technologies are in part responsible might be welcomed as a good thing. Sociologists since Johnson (1972) have argued that professional identities and norms have more to do with the universalization of professional ideologies and the power relations they concretize than safeguards of best professional practice (see also Deuze 2005). However, in line with the point made about restructuration above, deprofessionalization should be seen as replacing one set of criteria with another rather than simply doing away with dominant criteria. Like other fields of cultural production, this new journalism – however restructured – would be expected to run between two poles: broadly speaking, elitist and mass culture. What Bourdieu terms the pole of unrestricted cultural production is associated with specific criteria for ascribing value – in particular popularity, though analysis of print journalism suggests other plausible examples of valorized symbolic capital operating at this pole including authenticity (see below), moralism and underdog status (see also Conboy 2006). My own research (2007) indicates that the elite pole is associated with traditional journalistic values such as autonomy, integrity and objectivity, though there are further largely misrecognized values including cynicism and ambivalence towards power at work. Importantly, while it is true that the criteria associated with the pole of restricted production are peer-defined and serve the interests of established professional journalists, it is also only at this pole that certain forms of cultural production are possible. To be sure, this reasoning is more germane to a field such as scientific research, in which scientific peer review can be more easily seen as serving a properly democratic function of safeguarding the quality of knowledge defensibly regarded as being in the public interest. (Though Bourdieu also notes that even in the scientific field there are misrecognized economies at work which mask the strategising that underpins competition between scientists, namely the 'interest in disinterest' in financial gain). It is more problematic to apply this logic to journalism, but at least in the case of investigative journalism the reasoning is sound: it is a journalistic practice possible only at the pole of restricted production, and which, despite its insitutionalization and elitism, may serve a democratic function – say, holding power to account in a way that only a well-funded journalist, with experience of mixing in elite circles, and with ample time, could be expected to do (Lowrey 2006).⁴

Journalistic Authority and the Contingency of Authenticity

One of the most interesting developments is how quickly new norms of practice, identity and appearance have become established, and a political-phenomenological approach can

attempt to discern the processes of decontestation, naturalization and embodiment by which normalization proceeds. This is by no means methodologically uncomplicated, as it often means seeking to establish contingency where none is directly observable, but it does mean that we can ask on what grounds a particular piece of media content is perceived in certain definable contexts or amongst specific audiences as culturally valuable, or why a particular media producer is regarded as authoritative. Weber's embodiment thesis is useful in this regard. Writing about the clergy, Weber argued that institutional religious practice is not perceived (by peers and public alike) as the successful performance of the acquired requisite skills of this field, but rather an expression of personal character. Authority, then, consists not in the enactment of valorised practices but in their embodiment. Likewise, a journalist's authority would be expected to be perceived by colleagues and audience in terms of personality or innate instinct, rather than the nature of skills executed or work produced (Markham 2007). But this talent, enacted and interpreted as deontological or moral obligation, can be 'denaturalized' or unpacked. For instance, in (supposed) contrast to elite journalists, it seems bloggers are frequently valorized (this is apparent especially in comments made by readers) for their common sense and plain-speaking, presumably in opposition to the inauthenticity of the official language of politicians and the mainstream media (see also Robinson 2006). Theorists from Durkheim to Goffman have demonstrated the complex and conflicted configurations of decontestations, (re)significations and embedded practices upon which any recognisable form of common sense is predicated, and even if the more functionalist accounts of discursive hegemony are avoided (both Gramsci and Chomsky, for example, hold that the primary function of cultural forms is the reproduction of hierarchy, and any other functions of culture are essentially incidental. See Herman 1998), it remains valid to claim that common sense is a determination of specific social and political forces rather than something deontological. This is not to suggest that Internet media producers cannot speak sensibly, but rather that what counts as sensible is not universal but an alignment with the positions, orientations and trajectories of specific audiences or publics. This may not go further than the classic observation that people tend to read the newspaper that confirms their existing prejudices, but it does bear out the importance of decoupling common sense and democratization. It is certainly possible that wide recognition of a blogger's tendency to 'speak sense' equates to better media representation of the interests of media consumers than is offered by 'traditional' journalists, but it is also worth stressing that the relationship between media representation and democratic representation is highly contestable (Butsch 2007).

An exploratory qualitative analysis of attributions of value (is this a textual analysis of incidences of praise, concurrence etc?) across a month's output in ten opinion blogs was undertaken to investigate this seeming personalization of values in attributions by and about opinion bloggers⁵. It concluded, tentatively, that authority is constituted through a variety of valorized symbolic forms including authenticity, common sense, logic, humour, knowledge, intelligence, autonomy and courageousness. This would suggest that it is difficult to maintain an artificial distinction between the substance of an Internet journalist's output from the style and context of its expression. And it is especially notable that authority and authenticity appear to be significantly conflated (see also Livingstone 1998). This, again, is not to suggest that media producers of every ilk are innately manipulative. But it is also important to take account of research that has looked at exactly how the authentic journalistic voice is constituted and received across various genres. Some of this goes on at the level of the Durkheimian nonconscious,⁶ and a Bourdieusian approach building on this would look at the conditions of possibility of the experienced natural fit

between the phenomenal object and subject (that is, what preconditions exist for it to feel natural for a journalist or blogger to write about a particular phenomenon in a certain way) and between the producer and her audience. It also goes on very much at the conscious level in journalistic training: there are widely acknowledged techniques (Conboy 2006, identifies informality, complicity, metaphors and humour among others) by which a journalist can encode a voice, which appears without artifice to a specific audience. While not automatically at odds, it bears emphasising that authenticity of voice is also a crucial strategy for getting ahead in the journalistic (or blogging) game. It has rapidly become unremarkable practice, not in all blogs needless to say, but certainly in the majority of those examined here, to include details (sometimes relevant, sometimes not) of the blogger's tastes, mood and other aspects of an apparent internal monologue amongst external observations, which tend to take a fairly standard print journalistic form (Wall 2005). This can defensibly be construed as a performance of authenticity, or a claim, not necessarily conscious, to authority through endearment. Interestingly, and against Weber's account of how individuals come to be seen as authoritative embodiments of the skills they enact, it is arguable that bloggers (also) accrue reputability through articulations of character unrelated to the external phenomena which form their analytic object – or even, in the case of three blogs studied here, through a self-effacing disavowal of authority. Of course, personal asides are a key aspect of blogging discourse, and provide respite from the strictures of traditional journalistic narrative. However, the dominance of such principles of differentiation as attribute norms risks substituting the performance of blogging (and interactions between bloggers) for its engagement with objects outside the blogosphere. It is this elevation of the personal, or more precisely a highly mutually referential group of individuals valued according to perceived personal character, which weighs against the collective addressing of issues of shared concern, which I have here set out as a necessary component of democratization. Personal sympathy and charisma have long been important factors of journalistic success in particular contexts; it is possible that their domination as criteria for judging journalistic worth, however, point towards a nascent culture of narcissism, narrowly defined, in shared blogging practices.

Cultures of Narcissism?

Christine Rosen has over the past decade sought to update Christopher Lasch's 'culture of narcissism' thesis (Lasch 1978) and apply it to contemporary trends in education and parenting (Rosen 2005) and, most recently, social networking sites (Rosen 2007). In large part these are normative critiques of neo-liberal individualism, targeting especially the decline of personal responsibility, preoccupation with self-esteem and the broader therapy culture which Lasch saw as responses to the pervasive sense of insecurity experienced by increasingly atomized individuals. Writing about MySpace user profiles Rosen describes "an overwhelmingly dull sea of monotonous uniqueness, of conventional individuality, of distinctive sameness" (Rosen 2007: 24; see also Liu 2008), sensing behind the relentless drive towards cultural signification and projection of identity an impossibility of same. As regards blogging, it is tempting to use similarly normative allegations of self-indulgence and egoism to demonstrate, perhaps a little glibly, that present cultures of blogging are not compatible with democratic collectivism. A potentially more productive extension of Rosen's argument is to link the idea of incitement to discourse mentioned above to a drive to relentless signification where Internet users are always-already alienated from the signifiers available to them. There is not space to develop this argument fully here, but it will suffice for present purposes to stress that if narcissism is a useful device for

interpreting cultures of practice in web journalism, it is not in its more rhetorical deployment but rather in a phenomenological sense. By this way of thinking, individual subjects seek identity in part through seeing themselves as others do – *i.e.* as objects. However, if the subject who engages with the world is in fact a homogenized collection of generic signifiers of subjectivity, then the already-alienated self who enacts these significations cannot attain identity with the self as reflected back by the social world. If Rosen’s argument is transposable from social networking sites to online deprofessionalized journalistic practices, then blogging represents a futile attempt at full subjectivity based on homogenized cultural forms; the self being reflected back by other journalists is similarly comprised of the arbitrary and alienating. And instead of simply demonstrating the existential impossibility of full subjectivity (and if it is impossible on phenomenological grounds, why would we expect the Internet to provide the solution?), subjectification as it specifically proceeds online instead can be seen to suffer, counter-intuitively, from under-mediation (see also Couldry 2008). In reality it’s all too easy to project one’s subjectivity and to see oneself as reflected back by the Internet: it’s right there on the screen. But this represents a short-circuited subjectivity lacking mediation by other subjects. This is not to lionize an insupportable ideal of ‘real’ or ‘face-to-face’ interaction: the above Bourdieusian characterization of communication as politically complicit shows that no form of interaction is unproblematic, but each can be understood in terms of its own symbolic world. Phenomenologically, subjective identity cannot be an aim in itself; it arises only through mediation by other subjects and through acting in public spaces and, conservative as this might sound, institutions. Rosen’s interpretation of MySpace illustrates the degraded subjectivity, which can result from the prioritization of the projection of identity over interaction. Similarly, while blogging undeniably encourages a great deal of interaction, the dominance of the personal as criteria for recognising cultural value in the blogosphere, where the value of the personal is not pre-given but contingent upon the projection of systematically recognisable and hence homogenous signifiers of authenticity, likewise short-circuits the mediation of subjectivity. Such mediation does of course occur, and there is no sense in denying the extent of interactivity online – though there is some evidence that interactivity between journalists and their audience is overstated (Domingo 2008), and that blogging is more of a monologue than a dialogue (Wilhelm 2000). Where it does occur, *public* interaction, meaning that whose primary function is the contestation and negotiation of issues of shared concern, proceeds independently of any mooted collectivist teleology of the Internet, not because of it.

The Objectivity Dilemma

Knowledge about public issues has long been regarded as central to democratic politics, and more broadly to self-determination. It was noted earlier that Foucault’s problematization of the knowledge/power connection has specific implications for media disseminated online – namely that it can be argued to have a rationalising effect on media content and online identity, which in turn are claimed to have political effects. There is another concern, however, regarding the quality of information available rather than the politically complicit, structurally incited will to produce online content. This is not the place for a critique of the reliability of information published online – there is no shortage of such assessments after all – but there is a point to be made about how changes in the mode of production of journalistic content may impact on the democratic process. Nick Davies notes in his recent *Flat Earth News* (2008) that only twelve percent of the news articles he analysed contained evidence of original research – and he concludes that the main reason for this is that

journalists increasingly research stories online. (This is contestable, though, and several scholars have pointed to the countervailing potential for 'citizen' journalists' use of alternative sources; see for example Deuze et al 2007; Rauch 2007). The upshot is that the information available to news consumers is increasingly filtered through secondary and tertiary sources, and this has potentially significant implications, beyond the immediate point that reliability is not enhanced as one would expect from a multiplication of sources, since that multiplication takes the form of an echo effect rather than substantively different origins of information and interpretation.

One such implication leads us back to the Bourdieusian field model. If sources of news come increasingly from within the online arena, and the resulting news is recycled and reinterpreted, then there is a case for claiming that the Internet as a field of cultural production is increasingly governed by its internal logic rather than those of other fields. Different fields have varying levels of autonomy from other fields, and all, the Internet as much as any other, are increasingly subject to market demands. A highly autonomous field has the advantage of preserving its specialist modes of production (as in investigative journalism, above), but its 'rules of the game' – inevitably tied to the reproduction of hierarchies of power – are less susceptible to challenge. The journalistic field has historically been typified by gatekeeping structures, the mystification of journalistic practice and an inculturated professional ideology, all of which have the effect of preserving both the internal structures of the field and the broader social positioning of journalists. However, routine exposure to other fields has meant that the dominance of these internal logics has been tempered by the constant demonstration that, elsewhere, they are not regarded as natural or inevitable. In short, the recognition that things are done differently elsewhere means that the complete internalization of the rules of the journalistic game is effectively impossible. This tempering, though, comes through interaction with sources from different fields. Diminished exposure to external actors would be expected to lead to greater decontestation of the contingent norms of online journalism. This is not an argument that applies to the Internet in general, as to posit it, as a space insulated from the 'real' world, is self-evidently indefensible. However, in journalistic terms, it is feasible that the circularity of interactions between journalists, bloggers and sources (who are frequently other journalists and bloggers) would lead to a more internally coherent and autonomous journalistic lifeworld, which would in turn serve as a more effective means of reproducing both the positive (restricted production) and negative (political relations internalized and forgotten as political) aspects of cultures of media production.

Of course, this argument appears to validate the primary source (or in other words considers this abstraction as real to a degree). The implication is that for knowledge to be democratizing it has to be reliable, and reliability here is cast in strongly objectivist terms. It has been noted elsewhere that not only is objectivism an unachievable aim for journalists, it is used (consciously or otherwise) strategically by journalists competing with each other and cultural producers from other fields (Matheson 2003). This instrumentalist characterization of the journalist – as an intrepid hunter of facts – needs to be set alongside its centrality to cultural capital. It is also worth stressing that a journalist's engagement with online sources need not be set in opposition to a face-to-face interview, or characterized as a degraded form of communication. However, without wishing to exaggerate the phenomenological experience of witnessing an event first hand, it is valid to set out a theoretical position consistent with the above characterization of fields of cultural production as neither arbitrary nor simply objectively determined. This means interpreting events in the field as reasonable – which is to say explicable but not predictable from

outside the field, rather than having meaning only within the field as a discrete world. This in turn leads to the proposition that while a multiplicity of perspectives is an essential component of the democratization of knowledge, it is important that these be regarded as different interpretations of the same external event or phenomena, rather than merely different cultural manifestations within a discrete symbolic world which cannot be critically assessed from without. If Davies is correct, the disconnection of journalists from primary sources could feasibly amount to a wider dislocation between the online journalistic world and the material context in which it subsists.

Conclusion: How Should We Ascribe Political Meaning to Blogs?

The symbolic value of online media production is by no means easy to define; it is ascribed collectively by individuals similarly oriented towards recognising certain cultural forms and people as valuable. This circularity means that instead of looking for the origins of value in the media form itself or in its audience, we should look instead at the generative criteria, which precede both production and reception. These can be thought of as being locatable according to two axes, one roughly characterized by popularity, the other by 'volume' of symbolic capital recognized or consecrated in given contexts. This boils down to a familiar distinction between types of cultural value – namely, between that whose value is predicated on broad popularity, and that whose perceived value exceeds its limited popularity, because of its association with elite, alternative or niche interests. The cultural value of most media content is of course determined by a combination of these two principles. What is important in the context of this chapter is to emphasise that neither criterion is naturally compatible or antithetical to democratization. I suggested earlier that size of audience does not itself entail democratization, or at least that it assumes a democratic model defined according to freedom of choice of consumption. Similarly, a blog popular with a narrow elite audience is not necessarily anti-democratic, as by the logic set out above it is possible that only in such an elite space of production that certain cultural forms, including those having democratising effects, however defined, are possible.

There is not space here to develop a precise means of measuring the cultural value of a blog, but it is worth emphasising that different methodologies carry distinct political commitments and implications. For instance, the claim that expression of opinion is intrinsically politically valuable would suggest that no broader cultural value needs to be measured – this does logically follow, but represents either a narcissistic perspective or a merely formal political definition of political deliberation (much like Hegel's identification of the inadequacy of formal citizenship in the absence of substantive engagement and recognition in political life) in which the act of expressing or participating is prioritized over questions of content and context. A common gauge of a blogger's success is their uptake by media practitioners in the traditional field of political-cultural production – that is, politicians, think-tanks and media commentators (Carlson 2007a). However, this entails the perseverance of traditional journalism's gatekeeping and hierarchical structures (Singer 2005), which thus rules out the possibility of reforming the undemocratic tendencies of institutionalized journalism. There is no reason to think that these traditional structures would be opened or challenged by having new forms of media production feeding in: indeed, there is every reason to believe that existing structures, complicit as they are in reproducing hierarchies, are easily capable of assimilating new online discourses and, after Foucault, neutralising and rationalising them (Domingo 2008; Robinson 2006; Robinson

2007; Singer 2005). It does not follow that deprofessionalized media production feeding in to existing political structures will lead to their democratization.

Likewise, if the democratising effect of the blogosphere is judged by the level of interaction it generates, this needs to be balanced against the argument that interaction itself is not in any sense democratising unless it leads to some form of action, deliberation or contestation outside the confines of this particular arena of cultural production. This is certainly in line with one of the tangential conclusions of the Public Connection research project.⁷ It found that, against the democratic potential of media interactivity championed by the BBC and others, for a significant number of media consumers interaction makes little difference to their sense of connection to or disconnection from any sort of public world, unless there is a sense that such interaction leads to influence or change in some form of public world beyond the arena of information exchange. In line with the digital divide arguments made by many scholars over the past decade, this research found that new media forms tend only to be taken up for political purposes by those who are already politically engaged (see also Levine and Lopez 2004). If an important aspect of democratization is encouraging participation, then this (admittedly limited) data suggests that the Internet will not lead those who are already turned away from public issues to engage politically online, whether through responding to existing online political content – which for our purposes was defined as referring to any issues of shared concern, however conceived – or producing their own. What's more, the evidence suggests that we should not even necessarily *want* the Internet to encourage participation. This is not in the sense that, after Walter Lippmann (1925), citizens invariably engage haphazardly and on the basis of insufficient knowledge, and journalism should not be expected to educate people and thus correct the democratic deficit. Rather, our data indicated that for a significant minority disconnection is not experienced as problematic: some are happily turned away from any sort of mediated public world, and there is nothing the Internet can or should do about it.

Ultimately, the question of the cultural value of a particular piece of online journalism is secondary to what such a measurement can tell us about the dominant principles of differentiation in a given cultural field, which in turn have only an indirect relation to broader democratic and antidemocratic forces. We should start from the principle that in order to understand the 'meaning' of a blog we have to take into account all those who have an interest in ascribing value. That is, as well as taking seriously (and distinctly) the value ascribed to online journalism by professional journalists, political actors, online activists, consumers both active and passive, it is important to acknowledge that these groups are themselves engaged in a struggle in which the stakes are the capacity to define dominant criteria of control. The upshot is that we should not only be open to different interpretations of online content made by professional journalists and non-professional bloggers, for instance; we should see such differences as structured, and not necessarily overt, claims for power. Such struggles may have democratising effects or lead to new spaces of citizenship, but there is no reason to assume that they will.

Methodologically, it should be possible roughly to measure the cultural purchase of particular forms of online journalism: my initial research suggests that this should be done not by aggregating page impressions, responses or uptake in traditional media, but through qualitative analysis. This means in particular looking at the manner in which blog content is picked up on, with narratively or discursively normalized references to a blogger's status or views, their decontesting appearance in expressions of common sense, humour or throwaway comments, and references out of context revealing far more than a response

from a recognised authority. Evidence of such cultural purchase does not simply mean that views expressed in online media production are gaining influence – or by extension, that this could be seen as democratic insofar as it represents wider, or at least different, representation. It could also be interpreted as signifying simply that power has moved from one site of media production to another. This is not in itself democratic; it represents a shift from one prevailing form of authority (Robinson 2007; Thurman 2008), roughly speaking, professional and institutional, to another deprofessionalized one which I have characterized here as being contingent upon projected authenticity. And while different groups may benefit from a new configuration of power relations, there is no reason to invest the shift itself with a teleology of democratising reform. Moreover, shifting centres of power in journalism, as well as the decentring of power, do not inevitably change what Bourdieu terms the game itself. New forms of cultural production emerge, as do distinct principles or economies for attributing value to cultural production. Such emergences may coincide with democratising trends, but there are no reasons, beyond the strategic or complicit, to locate the teleology of such trends in these new forms.

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Notes

¹ This chapter will focus mainly on the democratising potential of non-professional 'opinion' bloggers, as distinct from blogs maintained by professional journalists, linklogs and personal online journals (*i.e.* those lacking external observations).

² Bourdieu (1993) defines the field of cultural production thus: "The field of production and circulation of symbolic goods is defined as the system of objective relations among different instances, functionally defined by their role in the division of labour of production, reproduction and diffusion of symbolic goods." More generally, it can be characterized as that space inhabited by individuals and groups who have a stake in producing, disseminating, legitimating and valorising information.

³ 'Lifeworld' (*Lebenswelt*) is used in the Husserlian sense of a taken-for-granted stream of everyday routines, interactions and events that constitute individual and social experience, rather than Habermas's conception of shared understandings and values which develop over time through face-to-face communication in a social group.

⁴ There are several counter-examples where bloggers have carried out significant investigative journalism, most notably in the reports leading up to the resignation of US Republican Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott.

⁵ The following sites were surveyed in May 2008 and coded using NVivo: Guido Fawkes (<http://www.order-order.com/>); Oliver Kamm (www.oliverkamm.typepad.com); Chicken Yoghurt (www.chickyog.blogspot.com); Bloggerheads (www.bloggerheads.com); Samizdata (www.samizdata.net/blog/); Normblog (normblog.typepad.com); Harry's Place (hurrypharry.bloghouse.net); Slugger O'Toole (www.sluggerotoole.com); Conservative Commentary (concom.blogspot.com/); What You Can Get Away With (<http://www.nickbarlow.com/blog/>)

⁶ For Durkheim, the social must be explained not by the conceptions of its participants, but by the structural causes which elude awareness but which necessitate the phenomena observed by the social scientist. For Bourdieu (1977), all observed behaviour (including participants' conscious reflections) should be seen after Bachelard as 'particular instances of the possible', ie specific expressions of common generative structures which are the key objects of social analysis.

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